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Microfilm Serves Researchers



One-of-a-kind records are vulnerable to destruction. Microfilm copies provide many advantages for researchers. CAC General Photograph Collection.

Fire. The word brings images of complete destruction. Even papers that have gone through floods can be cleaned off, freeze-dried, and restored. But when a document is burned, its information is gone forever. The loss is truly complete when there is no other copy of the information. Personal papers are most obviously vulnerable to this type of loss, but government, church, and organizational records that exist in only one copy are also at risk. That was the fate of the 1890 Federal Census. A fire in 1921 destroyed many 1890 population and special schedules, and water used to extinguish the blaze damaged many more. The full story can be found on the [National Archives](#) website.

Today, microfilm provides a backup copy of many historical records. With a "life expectancy" of 500 years, this medium most closely approaches the longevity of the original paper and has the added advantages of providing duplicates in far-flung places, and in conserving storage space in research facilities. Indeed, reading microfilm has become the most common way of doing historical research. The Center for Archival Collections manages a microfilming operation at our Conservation Laboratory, providing this service for newspapers, churches, and other manuscript collections. See *The Gallery* for a photo-essay on the CAC's microfilm lab. Thanks to microfilm, the CAC can provide researchers with access to information that might otherwise be lost or nearly impossible to find.

One such example is in the work of researcher Dan Masters. An amateur historian, Master's interest is in the Civil War, particularly the history of the 21st Ohio Volunteer Infantry. In looking for more information about the lives of the members of this regiment, Dan has read unit histories, official unit field records (see [MS 562](#)), diaries, letters, obituaries, and other newspaper accounts. It was while reading microfilmed newspapers that he realized that a wealth of previously unknown information could be gleaned from soldiers' letters to their hometown newspapers. At the time, there were no "wire services" and most newspapers could not afford to employ correspondents. Letters from soldiers often filled this need for news. Masters has created [indexes](#) to a number of local newspapers, providing researchers with a valuable resource for locating information about the troops and their regiments.

Although the Center for Archival Collections concentrates its collecting on northwest Ohio history, some manuscripts from local people have research uses far beyond the Great Lakes. Railroad historian Bruce MacGregor was searching for information about the development and construction of narrow-gauge railroads in California during the nineteenth century. He knew the names of the construction companies which had laid track and built the bridges, but he wanted more information about the businesses and the people involved. Turning to the internet, he located the William H. Gorrell Papers ([MS 446](#)) here at the CAC. Gorrell, a Toledo native, was President of the Pacific Bridge Company, one of the contractors who built bridges in California. The collection is extensive and MacGregor wanted to use it intensively, but he was unable to come to the CAC in person. We were able to microfilm the collection, and the microfilm was purchased by research libraries in California where MacGregor could consult it as often as he needed. His recent publication, *The Birth of California Narrow Gauge* (2003) contains much information and illustrations gleaned from the Gorrell Collection.

Genealogists are among the most dedicated of microfilm users. [Local government records](#), particularly births, deaths, marriages, and will records provide vital clues for tracing the history of a family. [Church records](#) supplement this information by recording names and dates when the government did not. In both cases, the Center for Archival Collections has microfilmed such records and now provides a central research facility where the government and church records of nineteen northwest Ohio counties can be searched in comfort. In this way, the original records themselves are saved from the wear and tear of repeated handling. Once again, microfilm provides researchers the convenience of a research medium which is clean, convenient, and compact—and one that can still be consulted in hundreds of years' time.

—Lee N. McLaird